My project is a word document including tables and illustrations, as well as links to appropriate internet sites where available. It is an examination of the part the protagonist plays in determining the structure of a story.

It seeks to explore the rational behind an author’s decision to use a mouse (as opposed to say a bear or a dog) as the protagonist in a particular work of fiction, and will include film, novel-length fiction and fables. I am operating from the thesis that an animal is in itself a symbol, and mice in particular are chosen when the author wants the protagonist to display particular traits.

I found my sources predominantly using Barnes and Noble’s on-line advanced search feature (www.bn.com) and Blockbuster’s on-line search feature (www.blockbuster.com). I also used the card catalog at UTA and at Dallas Public Library.

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### Methods of Analysis

I am including these elements beneath each annotation rather than in a separate section.

**Character and Symbolism:** I wish to discuss what it means to be a mouse and what qualities are expected of a mouse (vs. a rat or a cat). This will include three main reasons an author might feel a particular story’s protagonist is best portrayed as a mouse.

**Conflict:** I also wish to discuss the type of conflict that best suits mouse protagonists (which ties in with the reasons the author chose to make it a mouse story in the first place).
Setting: Focusing mainly on scale, I wish to discuss the alienation often found when mouse characters step outside their comfortable domain.

Film

http://homevideo.universalstudios.com/american_tail/movies/tail.html

This is the story of Fievel Mousekewitz, a young immigrant mouse from Russia who loses his family when he is washed overboard from the boat to America. He finds himself taken advantage of by Warren T. Rat in the way that many immigrants are and winds up working in a sweatshop. He escapes and continues looking for his family, meanwhile discovering that that rat is really a cat, bent on the domination of all mice in New York. The mice revolt and create the “Giant Mouse of Minsk” to terrify the cats into leaving America. The cats wind up on a boat to the orient.

Character and Symbolism: Mice in this film represent the common people, as contrasted with rats (those who act like good-guy mice but really exploit the people), and cats (stereotypical fat-cats who use force to terrify the people). There is a song early on in the movie where the various mice tell about the “cats” in their home countries: in Russia they are the military police; in Italy they are the Dons; in Ireland they are the roving gangs. The Mousekewitzes come filled with hope, honestly believing that there will be “no cats in America,” that they will find justice and a better life. Fievel is a curious and trusting mouse who loves adventure. And this is what gets him into trouble. However, he never gives up believing that everything will come out right in the end: he will find his family and he will never lose that hat.

Fievel is also a mouse because he is a child and must deal with being smaller than everybody else. One key plot point deals with the fact that being a children, Feivel and his sister Tillie are too short to see each other over the crowd of other mice. He also has a hard time having his ideas taken seriously, which makes it even more of a triumph when his plan is accepted at the end.

Conflict: Fievel’s main conflict deals with idealism versus the practical He truly believes there will be no cats in America, and it is a shock to him to find out that there are. Fievel, however, turns this dreaminess to good advantage. When he is locked in the sweatshop, he escapes because he remembers the story about “the mouse with the really long hair.” Later, he remembers another story which allows him to triumph over the cats.

This story also has elements of a quest. Though he must survive, Fievel’s main concern is being reunited with his family.

Setting: The mice live in a world that is a miniature replica of the human world. For instance, when Fievel is working in the sweatshop, the mice weave their way around the ankles of human women working away at sewing machines. Also, when his family is getting on the boat, they travel across a rope, and the camera also shows human immigrants walking across a gangplank. Though parallel, such as when the police and the cats come respectively to torment the human and mouse villages at the very beginning, they do not often intersect. There is only one scene where Fievel has any real interaction with a human, and this is when he has mistaken a record for his father playing a favorite song on a violin. He accidentally falls inside the bell of a gramophone, whose owner is shocked and upset to find a mouse in the house.
Everything about the world Fievel has dropped into is too big for him, not just physically, but emotionally (having to fend for himself, not understanding his two new friends falling in love) and responsibility as well. The external becomes metaphor for what is inside him.


In this mouse-view Sherlock Holmes tale, Basil of Baker Street must defeat the evil Ratigan, a Moriarity-like nemesis who has kidnapped a toymaker and plans to force him to make a life-sized mouse-sized replica of the Queen of England’s Mousedom. The dastardly plot is, of course, foiled by Basil and the intrepid Dr. Dawson (Watson), along with the toymaker’s daughter, Olivia.

Character: All of the good characters are mice, though there seem to be a few mice-gone bad under Ratigan’s influence. The stereotypes are fully developed before the story begins. “Rat” becomes shorthand for no-good villain. In fact, when one of his drunken cohorts accidentally calls Ratigan a rat instead of a “big mouse, a really big mouse,” Ratigan feeds him to a cat. This is a mouse-with-clothes story, showing their civility. However, at the end, Ratigan has his cloak ripped off in the clockworks of Big Ben, and naked, he reveals his bestial nature.

The main motivation in making the characters mice seems to be appeal to children.

Setting: There are several scenes which show the mice facing a world of a much larger scale. The very first scene of the movie shows a carriage with a voice-over from Dr. Dawson. At first it seems like the animator’s “camera” will focus in on the people, but then it dips to show the tiny mouse underneath. The mouse homes seem to be a micro-version of the human buildings that surround them. Buckingham Palace has a tiny garden entrance to the Mouse-Queen’s chambers. Basil’s home fits him perfectly. Yet, when he ventures into the human toy-maker’s shop, he seems to be at a loss, with dolls that tower over him. Dr. Dawson is quite nearly speared by a clockwork knight, and he does wind up pinned to a dart board. In this scene, as in the clock tower, where the gears are giant, and the clock hands offer room for a scuffle, Basil seems out of the total control of situations that he displays elsewhere.

Conflict: The conflict is mouse vs. rat, where mice are civilized and rats are greedy, power-hungry brutes. In a minor way, it is also mouse vs. cat, for only in a mouse story could someone threaten the Queen of England by attempting to feed her to a feline.


This film is a compilation of eleven of the most famous cartoon shorts starring Mickey Mouse. They include Steamboat Willie, Mickey’s first cartoon, as well as other representative cartoons where he shared the celluloid stage with Minnie, Donald, Goofy and Pluto.
Character and Symbolism: At first, I couldn't figure out how Mickey Mouse fit into the suppositions for this assignment. Why is he a mouse? Of course, he appeals to children, or they wouldn't be willing to drive half way across the country for a pair of mouse ears. But Mickey just doesn't act like a mouse. First off, he has a pet dog and, in at least one episode, a pet cat. He interacts with other non-clothes-wearing mice as though they were his inferior. He is both brave and silly and can adapt himself to almost any character. I had half convinced myself that he was a mouse because big round ears are easy to draw.

Conflict: It wasn't until the last cartoon on the video, Steamboat Willie, that I found the conflict that made him a mouse. In the very first Mickey cartoon ever made, the steamboat captain is a cat, and the plot boils down to a very strange mouse versus cat scenario, where by the end, the mouse is peeling potatoes because the boss-cat has power over him. It is the same kind of conflict seen in An American Tale, where the mouse is the good-hearted common guy (even if he does throw a potato at the captain’s parrot at the end) trying to thwart the evil cat-captain.

Mickey remained a mouse simply because the character was popular, though Mickey’s appearance changed over the years to become more complex.

Setting: The settings chosen are often surreal, and seemed to be powered by classical music and the pun. For instance, in one episode, Mickey wants to play the William Tell overture and Donald wants to play Turkey in the Straw. When Mickey gets to the storm scene in the music, a storm brews up out of nowhere, just to match the music. In another cartoon, Mickey goes "Through the Looking Glass," to a place where when he says "skip it," as in forget it, he winds up skipping rope. His house changes from story to story as well, including a pop-up trailer that pops up a yard, a picket fence and a small forest.

Character and Symbolism: Stuart is a mouse because mice are seen as insignificant and quite different from humans. It might have been cool to have a baby brother who was a bear or a lion, but a mouse is quiet, perhaps a bit timid, easy to dismiss. Symbolically here, Stuart seems to stand for a minority. He is a small and overlooked waif who has seen others adopted while he is passed by because he is different. Just think of the caseworker’s face when she says, "We try to discourage families from adopting outside of their own species.” The book the film was based on was published in 1973, when it may have been just as easy for her to say, "We try to discourage families from adopting outside of their own race.”

Conflict: Much of the conflict here is literally cat versus mouse. On a deeper level, I think it is a fight against prejudice, with the cats being those who have the power and the hate, and the mice, even Stuart’s "fake-family,” being the victims.. The adult Littles become the voice of reason, of opened minds. Both Snowball and George find themselves in the middle, minds with the potential to be opened.
Stuart also has inner conflict. He has found himself in a world where he doesn’t seem to belong. He must decide if he really is so different that he can't really be a little. He overcomes this to a great degree when he finally finds his way home and says, “Every little in the world can find the Little house.”

**Setting:** The world Stuart finds himself thrown into is definitely a human one. His bed is about a million times too big for him. He gets thrown down the laundry chute. His new family throws him a welcome party, and one new relative brings a bowling ball, another a bicycle – all on the wrong scale. Mrs. Little buys Stuart’s clothes at the toy store. All of this heightens the mood of alienation, of not quite fitting in. However, there are touches that some of this has to do with being a child as well as a mouse. For instance, George must also climb steps to get to his sink – just not so many as Stuart.

**Fiction**


In this novel, Abel is a gentleman mouse out for a picnic with his wife Amanda. A sudden storm blows up, and Amanda’s scarf is lost. While trying to retrieve it, Abel himself is lost to the river, riding a tiny board with a nail in it to a tiny island. At first, Able is concerned mainly with staying alive and trying to get off the island. He gathers food and fights an owl. Later, he begins making sculpture to keep himself company, and also reads a book left on the island by a visiting bear. Finally, the seasons change again, and after a year, the river reaches its lowest point, and swims across to be reunited with his dear wife.

**Character and Symbolism:** Abel is a mouse because he must be small, yet refined to make the most of the challenges Steig throws at him. The main point seems to be that we may seem insignificant compared to the elements surrounding us, but if we have strength of character, we can do what seems impossible. At first, Abel resists losing the civilized element of himself that insists that carrots must be cooked and shirts starched. But by the end he really lives up to his name, proving himself able to adapt, to persevere, to the point that by the end he can face a cat and wind up throwing *her* out of a tree. Able is everything that mice protagonists stereotypically are: good at heart, quiet, reserved. Yet, as any good protagonist, he grows to be something more than stereotypical, more dynamic, more human.

There may also be the element that having the character be a mouse softens the story and makes it appeal to children. I can’t help but contrast the warm illustrations in this book with the harshness of adult films such as *Castaway* that deal with similar subject matter.

**Conflict:** The main conflict here is man . . . um, mouse versus nature. Able attempts to create a series of boats, but is repeatedly thwarted by the river. He must find shelter. First, he sleeps in a tree, but when he falls out of the tree, he makes a house out of an abandoned log. While Able behaves like a man, building boats and weaving cloth, the challenges he faces are truly mouse-like. On the island, he faces an owl, which repeatedly comes to hunt him. He has to make the difficult decision to use his sharp rodent teeth rather than his penknife. Even when he gets off the island, he must face a cat before he can return home.

More subtly, there is the element of mouse versus himself. On the island, Able has plenty of time to think about the kind of mouse he is and the kind of life he has lead. He describes himself as a “fop” and remembers clowning around at his own wedding. He has never had to work. He begins to wonder what it is that Amanda sees in him. His loneliness brings on the beginnings of madness, and it is in this madness that he finds the key to self-fulfillment: art.
He makes statues of Amanda, then of his parents. By the time Glower the Frog visits his island, he has become quite a good sculptor.

**Setting:** Abel’s island is set on a tiny speck of land in the middle of a river. Again the idea of scale comes into play, for being a mouse, Able can see both banks without having the ability to swim to safety. This setting is in contrast with the one implied at the beginning that we only really see at the end: that of Abel’s comfortable house. The symbolism implied by the two places is obvious. By limiting the setting, much of the book takes place inside Abel himself. While he finds himself out of scale with the world in general, he is perfectly at home with Glower the Frog and the other non-carnivorous animals he meets.


Ralph is a young mouse who lives with his mother and his brothers and sisters and his cousins in an old run-down hotel called the Mountain View Inn. When a family comes to stay in the room where Ralph’s mouse hole is located, he cannot help but be curious. And when he finds out that Keith, the little boy in the family, has brought a shiny red toy motorcycle, Ralph cannot resist the chance to ride it. He winds up in the wastebasket, an unlikely way to begin a friendship, but he and Keith bond over the motorcycle. Things are going well until Keith falls ill and Ralph must risk whiskers and tail to find him an aspirin, despite the fact that Ralph’s father was poisoned by just such a pill.

**Character and Symbolism:** This is a story about growing up, and I think Cleary chose a mouse for Ralph because mice are in many ways like children. The similarity is drawn in part because Ralph and Keith can talk to each other, whereas grownups can’t talk to mice. Ralph and Keith parallel each other in their interests and in their views of what it means to be responsible. As for a child, the obstacles Ralph faces would be easy for an adult to overcome.

**Conflict:** Ralph’s main conflict is internal. He wants to grow up and be big enough to go down to the ground floor of the hotel. However, he must show his mother that he is responsible. This is off to a shaky start when he winds up caught in a wastebasket. Later, he must prove to Keith that he is responsible enough to ride the motorcycle, and he must regain that trust after the motorcycle is temporarily lost en route with the sheets to the laundry room.

Even in the dramatic search for the aspirin tablet, which leads Ralph to be captured in a glass, thrown out the window towards a hungry owl, harassed by a dog, and forced to jump the motorcycle over the gap into the elevator, the issue at stake is responsibility. He has gone against his mother’s wishes to even do these things. He has told her that he is not too young, and he must live up to that. Further, he must live up to the friendship and trust Keith has given him.

**Setting:** Ralph can be a hero in his own mouse hole, but the hotel is a dangerous place for him. Again, the problem is scale – he can’t jump across the gap from the hallway to the elevator, the vacuum could suck him right up, and bed sheets can easily become a prison. However, the motorcycle is just the right scale, a blend of human and mouse imaginations that allows him to race through the hotel, as long as he keeps his tail out of the spokes.
Hermux Tantamoq is a watchmaker who leads an ordinary life until he takes a watch repair order from an extraordinary female mouse. When he follows his curiosity after she fails to return to pick it up, Hermux finds himself embroiled in a scheme to make a potion that will stop or reverse aging. He befriends a mole named Pup who also turns out to be the main villain, breaks into the lab and rescues the charming lady mouse, who, at the end, turns out to be engaged to another..

**Character and Symbolism:** Hoeye is very aware of animal stereotypes, and in this book he is having fun with them. The mice are varied, from the reserved and proper Hermux himself, to the villainous obsessed artist Tucka Mertslin. Hermoux participates in the animal-type stereotyping. For instance, he calls the police at one point to report some suspicious rats, and cannot believe that the officer is himself a rat. Later, he has a hard time believing that evil Dr. Mennus, whom he assumed to be a rat, could in fact be a mole because he has based all his opinions about moles on the bright, eager reporter Pup Schoonagliffen.

To Hermux, being a mouse does indeed mean something.

**Conflict:** This is not a particularly mouse-type conflict. In fact, I kept forgetting that the characters were mice and moles and such except during scenes where something mouse-like would be mentioned, such as when Hermux thinks Tucka is wearing too much rouge, and it has turned her face fur orange, or when the blind artist Merrin tells Hermux that Tucka was expelled from art school for building a exceptionally macabre life-sized mouse trap.

Though there is enough action and peril to keep a John Grisham fan interested, the real conflict here is one of values. On the one side you have Tucka and Mennus who want to include the youth serum in a new cosmetics line, making millions from freezing beauty. On the other side, you have Merrin (who believes that beauty must be alive and changing to be real) and Ortolina Perriflot, who believes that such serums belong to mankind. In the middle, Hermux learns a lot about art and that which just claims to be art (such as the crime-scene décor Tucka puts in the lobby of the apartment building they share) and about beauty and that which has profaned the beautiful.

**Setting:** Hermux's world is a world completely separate from humans, where animals are people. They build homes, consume doughnuts, live and dream. It serves to make Hermux's perceptions and stereotyping light satire of our own world.

**Fables**


Determined to find the mightiest husband for herself, a mouse approaches the sun, a cloud, and the wind, who all reject her because of their might. Finally she approaches a house, who reveals that the strongest creature yet lives in the basement – a male mouse who could destroy the house from the inside out with his strong teeth.
**Character and Symbolism:** This story is about a mouse who does not know a mouse’s worth. She wants to marry something big and strong because she does not have a realistic view of the strengths of her own species.

**Conflict:** The real conflict her is internal, for the mouse must overcome the rejections of the sun, the wind, etc. and open her mind to the possibilities of a real husband.

**Setting:** This setting is removed from the human world, even though the house is in the story. It is portrayed through charming illustrations.

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*Illustration from http://www.umass.edu/aesop/cat/cattrad.html*


This story began as a fable by Aesop, with the moral that you shouldn’t waste your time proposing impossible solutions to real problems. All of the mice get together and decide to put a belled collar on the cat to warn them from danger, but one old mouse points out that none of them are brave enough to actually do it.

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**Character and Symbolism:** In the middle ages, the tale took on new dimensions when the baronial lords applied it to their relationship with king Edward III. Langland wrote a new allegory on the topic, and it became a subject of art at the time. Speaking of Langland’s application, then of the later application against James III, The Moscow Cat Museum web site has this to say: "The bells are brought but no one dares to fix them on the cat. Then a mouse speaks up to say that even if they get rid of this cat another one, or its kitten, will come to persecute them in its place. By means of these symbols Langland made this passage understandable to everyone. The cat was King Edward 111, the kitten who might replace him was his grandson Richard, then heir to the throne, the rats and mice were the commoners. The fable became well known and was narrated in a speech by Lord Gray to the conspirators against the favourites of King James 111, at which Archibald, Earl of Angus, exclaimed, 'I am he who will bell the cat'; from which occasion he was to become known as 'Archibald Bell-the-cat'."

I include this fable here because it is an excellent example of how mice can represent the common man, and of how there are certain qualities ascribed to mice that men can see in themselves. It also points out how a story told so long ago can influence men through history.

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**Conflict:** This is a standard mouse versus cat conflict, only the fable leaves it unresolved. Nobody actually bells the cat, and Aesop leaves us with the following moral: “It is one thing to say something should be done, but quite another matter to do it.”

**Setting:** The setting details given here are minimal, and the human world does not intrude.
A mouse begs a lion to spare her life, claiming that she will “certainly” be able to repay him in the future. Though he does not believe something as insignificant as a mouse could ever help him, the lion is stirred to mercy and releases her. Later, the lion becomes trapped in a hunter’s net, and the mouse hears him cry out. She gnaws away the ropes, thus repaying the lion.

**Character and Symbolism:** There is an interplay here between the way that Mouse feels about herself and the way Lion views her. Even though she knows she is small, Mouse feels that she is worth something and able to accomplish things.

**Conflict:** The conflict here is mouse versus cat in a different sense. The lion is not painted as bad, and he is even shown to have a merciful heart. However, he is arrogant, believing that size and strength are all he needs and he discounts the worth of a mouse. Though Aesop offers the moral, “A kindness is never wasted,” we can also take from this story the idea that we still have worth no matter how insignificant we feel, and we should offer others that same respect.

**Setting:** Man intrudes in this setting only to the extent that he placed a net in the woods. This is a natural forest setting, and mouse feels right at home.

**Summary**

I propose that there are three main reasons to use a mouse for a protagonist:

1. To appeal to children because children are also small, expected to be quiet and often considered cute but not taken seriously, which gives them sympathy to mice-type problems.
2. To make a metaphor for the common person when contrasted with a more powerful rat or cat class.
3. To contrast good versus an evil cat or rat class.

In some of the stories discussed in this project, more than one of these elements is at work.

I feel that I have shown that the species of the protagonist in animal stories is important, and that it reflects stereotyping that is evident in the pre-judgments we make, which has a lesson to teach about the pre-judgments we make about other people, for in reality each of these protagonists is vastly different.

However, I have also learned that sometimes mice are used as protagonists just because they are cute, as in such picture books as Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse. The main challenge with this project was weeding out charming works that didn’t really have a lot to say but were rather more important for didactic teaching, such as If You Give a Mouse a Cookie. Especially after looking at the Moscow cat Museum site, I think an interesting corollary project would be investigation why such sinister attitudes are attributed to cats.

**NOTE:** Unless otherwise stated, all images are either clip art or have been taken from www.bn.com or www.blockbuster.com.